SŪRAH 48

Al-Fatḥ

(Victory)

Prologue

This *sūrah* belongs to the Madīnan period, revealed as it was shortly after the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah in year 6 of the Islamic calendar. It comments on the events leading to the momentous signing of this treaty as also describes the situation in which the Muslim community found itself at that time. Between the revelation of this *sūrah* and *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which precedes it in the Qur'ānic order, there was a lapse of three years which witnessed developments that had far-reaching effects on the life of the Muslim community in Madīnah. These involved changes in the attitudes of both the Muslim community and its opponents, and even greater changes in the Muslim community's psychological and mental framework. In this respect, it became far more mature in its understanding and implementing of faith.

Before we discuss the *sūrah* and its message, however, we need to review the major event that was the signing of the peace treaty so as to understand the circumstances then prevailing as the Muslim community received this new revelation.

The Prophet saw himself in a dream entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah together with his Companions, some of them having shaven their heads and some with their hair cut short. The unbelievers in Makkah had prevented them entry into Makkah since their migration

to Madīnah. They did not even allow them entry during the four sacred months that all Arabs honoured in the pre-Islamic period, laying down their arms and regarding fighting during these times as a great enormity. Entry into Makkah during these four months was free for all, in perfect safety. Even people involved in vengeance killings would meet in peace at this time. A man would come across the killer of his father or brother without raising a finger against him, or trying to prevent his entry into the Sacred Mosque. Nevertheless, the idolaters in Makkah violated their well-established traditions, preventing the Prophet and the Muslims from entering Makkah throughout the six years that followed their migration to Madīnah. In year 6, the Prophet had this dream and reported it to his Companions who were delighted with it, realizing that a dream by a prophet would certainly come true.

For further information about these events we will mainly rely on the report given by Ibn Hishām as this is more detailed than most and also provides a fuller picture. It is also generally in agreement with reports in the two *Ḥadīth* anthologies of Imām al-Bukhārī and Imām Aḥmad, as well as the summary given by Ibn Ḥazm in his book *Jawāmi' al-Sīrah*, and with reports by other scholars.[1]

> The Prophet announced to his Companions and to the Arabian tribes around Madīnah that he intended to visit Makkah to honour the Ka'bah and to worship there. He invited them all to join him. Most of the Arabian tribes which had not yet accepted Islam were highly reluctant to join this peaceful expedition because they feared that the Quraysh were bound to resist the Muslims and prevent them from entering Makkah. If the Quraysh were determined to stop the Muslims, an armed conflict might erupt. Hence, those Arabian tribes wanted to stay out of it. The Muslims, however, were very glad to join the Prophet, who marched at the head of some 1,400 of his followers.[2]

1. I am quoting here my own version of the events. It is faithful to the report by Ibn Hishām, omitting only a few details that a reader who is unfamiliar with historical Arabic reports written more than 1,000 years ago would find difficult, and adding a few explanatory sentences. I do not, however, divert from the narrative as given by the author. – Editor's note.

2. Salahi, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, p. 497.

> The Prophet, however, marched on until he arrived at a place called Ghadīr al-Ashṭāṭ where Bishr ibn Sufyān gave him his report that the Quraysh were mobilizing and seeking the help of others to fight him and prevent him from entering Makkah.[3]

The Prophet was distressed at this report. He said: "How ill-advised is the Quraysh! What would they lose if they were to leave me alone addressing my message to the rest of Arabia? If those Arabs were to kill me, the Quraysh would have what they wish. If I am to be the victorious, they must either accept Islam without having suffered any losses, or fight me with their forces intact. What do they think? By God, I will continue to strive for the message God has given me until it is triumphant or I die."

> Reflecting on the new situation after he had learnt that the Quraysh were preparing for armed conflict, the Prophet decided to try to avoid such an eventuality. Hence, he asked whether anyone in his camp was able to lead them through a route which took them away from the Quraysh, so that they could avoid an armed conflict with their advance force. A man from the tribe of Aslam came forward and led them through a very rough route which was very hard for the Muslims. Eventually, they found themselves in an open area which was easy to cross. The Prophet commanded them to take the right-hand route until they finally arrived at the plain of al-Ḥudaybiyah, to the south of Makkah, which was only a day's walk from the Holy City.

A Declaration of Peace

Suddenly, the Prophet's she-camel sat down. People shouted at her to make her rise again, but she would not move. Some people suggested that she refused to go forward. The Prophet told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. He said: "She is held back for the same reason which held back the elephant." This was a reference to an incident which took place nearly 60 years earlier

3. Ibid., p. 499.

when Abrahah, the ruler of the Yemen, was riding an elephant at the head of a large force, whose aim was to destroy the Ka'bah. Shortly before arriving in Makkah, the elephant sat still and would not move forward; it was ready to go back. Shortly afterwards, Abrahah's army was attacked by birds which threw stones at the army and destroyed it. The story is mentioned in a short *sūrah* of the Qur'ān entitled, The Elephant, and which may be translated as follows: "*In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Are you not aware how your Lord dealt with people of the Elephant? Did He not utterly confound their treacherous plan, and send against them flocks of birds, which pelted them with stones of sand and clay? Thus He made them like stalks of devoured leaves.*" (105: 1–5)

The Prophet then declared: "By Him Who holds my soul in His hand, I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today which helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." He then ordered his Companions to encamp.

The place was almost dry, with only one well with very little water. The Companions of the Prophet economized on water as much as they could, but the well soon dried up. When they were very thirsty, they complained to the Prophet. He came to the well, sat next to it and asked for a pail to be brought to him with whatever quantity of water they could find. He took some water in his hand, rinsed his mouth and prayed to God. He then asked his Companions to pour the water back into the well and told them to leave the well for a while. Some reports also suggest that the Prophet took an arrow from his bag and asked his Companions to throw it into the well. Soon the well was full of water and provided all the water the Muslims needed to drink, perform ablutions and give to their camels and other animals. They suffered no shortage of water until they departed.

Successive Emissaries

When the Quraysh realized that the Prophet had managed to evade their advance forces and that he was encamped at al-Ḥudaybiyah,

they decided to send a messenger to him. They were also aware that should they succeed in stopping Muḥammad from entering Makkah, when he had come with no purpose other than to visit the Sacred Mosque, their action would not go unquestioned by the other Arabs. Their prestige was derived from the fact that they were custodians of the Sacred House and that they prevented no one from worshipping there. The first emissary they sent was Budayl ibn Waraqā' of the tribe of Khuzā'ah, who went with a group of his fellow tribesmen. The tribe of Khuzā'ah was always sympathetic towards the Prophet. Some of its men had embraced Islam, but even those who had not were far from hostile to the message of Islam. Budayl spoke to the Prophet and told him that the Quraysh were determined to prevent him from entering Makkah. The Prophet assured him that he had no intention of fighting anyone. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah and to demonstrate the Muslims' recognition of its sanctity. The Prophet's comment on the Quraysh's attitude was given in these words: "The Quraysh are now in such a state that they can think only of war. I am prepared to agree a truce with them, if they so desire. I ask them only to leave me alone to speak to people. If I am successful and other people follow me, then the choice is theirs to do likewise. If they refuse, they will have preserved their strength. If they are determined to stop me, I swear by God that I will fight them over this cause of mine until I die, and even then they cannot prevent what God wills."

Budayl went back to the Quraysh and said to them: "We have come to you after seeing this man and hearing what he says. Would you like to hear what he told us?" Some of them shouted: "We do not wish to hear anything he says." Some wiser people requested him to report what he had heard. When he finished his report, he pleaded with them, saying that they were rash in their attitude because Muḥammad did not intend to fight them. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah.

The Quraysh leaders were not persuaded to moderate their attitude. They said: "Even if he does not want to fight, he will never be allowed to enter Makkah against our will. No one shall say that we allowed that to happen."

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥafs to speak to the Prophet, and he came back with the same message as Budayl. The third envoy the Quraysh sent was al-Ḥulays ibn ʿAlqamah, the leader of the Ḥabshī tribe. When the Prophet saw him coming from a distance, he said to his Companions: "This is a man who belongs to a religious community. Drive the sacrificial animals towards him so that he may see them." When al-Ḥulays saw the sacrificial animals, he returned to the Quraysh without speaking to the Prophet, because he realized that there should have been no cause for contention. He advised the Quraysh to leave Muḥammad alone and allow him to worship at the Kaʿbah. They spoke harshly to him and told him to leave them alone. Al-Ḥulays was angered by the Quraysh's attitude, but they were not to be persuaded by any argument.

The Fourth Envoy

Having rejected the advice of all three envoys to allow Muḥammad to enter Makkah and worship at the Kaʿbah, the Quraysh decided to send a fourth emissary. None of the existing reports throws any light on the reasons which made the Quraysh feel that sending another envoy to speak to the Prophet would bring about any change in the situation. It is not known what the Quraysh hoped to achieve by sending these envoys when it was not prepared to listen to their advice. Perhaps it was all a mark of the Quraysh's confusion. On the other hand, it may have been an exercise in self-justification. The Quraysh might have wanted to be able to say that they tried all they could to reach accommodation with Muḥammad. Be that as it may, the man the Quraysh chose this time was ʿUrwah ibn Masʿūd, a leader of the tribe of Thaqīf, which lived in the town of Ṭāʾif. ʿUrwah, however, wanted first to make sure that on his return he would not receive the same harsh treatment as the other envoys the Quraysh sent, should he come back with advice the Quraysh might not like. He, therefore, addressed the people of the Quraysh: "I have noted what sort of abuse you have poured on the heads of those you have sent to Muḥammad. You know that to me you are

parents and that I am your son. When I heard of your trouble, I gathered those of my people who obeyed my orders and have come to give you support." The Quraysh answered: "This is certainly true, and we have no doubts about you." When he sat down to speak to the Prophet, he said:

> Muḥammad, I have left your people mobilizing their forces. They are swearing that they will never let you reach the Sacred House until you have overwhelmed them. Should there be a fight between you and them, you are faced with one of two eventualities: either you conquer your own people – and we have never heard of any man who has conquered his own people or your soldiers will let you down. Have you gathered this mob to smash your own people? It is the Quraysh you are fighting, and the Quraysh have mobilized even their women and children, and are now in a very determined mood, pledging to God that you will never enter their city. My feeling is that you will be in a very difficult situation tomorrow, when this mob let you down. I certainly recognize no one among them and cannot see that any one of them comes from a respectable background.

At this moment Abū Bakr interrupted him and told him to be more respectful.

As he talked to the Prophet, 'Urwah kept trying to hold the Prophet's beard, following the Arabian habit which indicated a sincere desire to maintain good relations. Al-Mughīrah ibn Shu'bah, a Muslim nephew of 'Urwah, was standing behind the Prophet, holding his sword in his hand and wearing his shield. Every time 'Urwah raised his hand to touch the Prophet's beard, al-Mughīrah hit him with the bottom of his sword on his hand and said: "Keep your hand off the Prophet's face before it is chopped off." 'Urwah did not recognize him, but when he persisted, 'Urwah said: "Confound you – how ill-mannered you are." The Prophet smiled at this demonstration of his Companion's love and respect for him.

'Urwah tried his best to weaken the Prophet's determination to enter Makkah, raising before him the prospect of defeat and counselling him against causing a military conflict. The Prophet assured him that he wanted nothing more than to pay a visit to the Ka'bah in the same way as anyone else could visit it to worship, and was not prevented from so doing. After all, the Ka'bah did not belong to the Quraysh; they were only its custodians and as such they had no right to prevent anyone from worshipping there.

'Urwah did not fail to notice the Muslims' respect for the Prophet. When he went back to the Quraysh he advised them:

> People of the Quraysh, I have seen the Khosroe, the Persian Emperor, and the Caesar of the Byzantine Empire and Negus of Abyssinia, in their respective kingdoms. I swear that I have never seen a king enjoying among his people a similar position to that of Muḥammad among his Companions. They do not fix their eyes when they look at him; they do not raise their voices when they speak to him. He does not need to give more than a signal to any one of them for that man to do what he is bid. I have looked at those people and I have seen that they do not care what may happen to them if they are able to protect their master. Make up your minds. He has made a proposal to you and I counsel you to conclude a peace agreement with him, and to accept his offer. I am giving you my sincere advice and I certainly fear that you will not be able to overcome him.

The Quraysh, however did not like 'Urwah's opinion and were not willing to consider the idea of peace. 'Urwah, therefore, left them with his people and returned to Ṭā'if.

Thus, every envoy the Quraysh sent returned and counselled them to moderate their attitude and allow the Muslims to offer their worship at the Ka'bah. None, however, was able to persuade the Quraysh that its hard-line did not serve its own interest. Motivated by pride and anger, the Quraysh was determined not to give in, whatever the cost.

The Muslims, on the other hand, did not wish to overrun Makkah. That course would result in more bloodshed and a fight against their own people. They stayed calm, hoping that some solution to the problem could still be found.

One report suggests that the Quraysh sent a small force of 40 or 50 men, giving them orders to go around the Muslims' camp and try to take one of the Prophet's Companions prisoner. As it turned out, they were taken prisoner themselves and were brought before the Prophet. He, however, pardoned them and set them free. God mentions in the Qur'ān that He has bestowed calmness on His Messenger and the believers and caused them to abide by the rules of faith and piety. That is the attitude which best becomes them.

The Prophet's Envoy

Considering the situation and the fact that he had received four emissaries from the Quraysh without any sign that the Quraysh were mellowing their opposition to the Muslims' entry to Makkah, the Prophet thought it might be useful to bring some pressure to bear on the Quraysh. He therefore decided to send them an envoy to assure them that his objective was only to worship at the Ka'bah, not to pick a fight with anyone. The envoy was Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah of the tribe of Khuza'ah. As soon as Kharrāsh arrived in Makkah, however, his camel was wounded by the Quraysh people, who also wanted to kill him. He was saved by the Ḥabshī tribe, whose chief al-Ḥulays was one of the Quraysh's envoys to the Prophet. The treatment Kharrāsh received was against the age-honoured traditions of diplomacy, which gave immunity to messengers and envoys. The Prophet, however, did not wish to allow this incident to be an obstacle in his attempt to reach a peaceful solution to the problem. He therefore overlooked the matter and concentrated on maintaining contact with the Quraysh. He thought that sending a more prominent figure from among his Companions might be more useful.

The Prophet first thought of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb as a suitable messenger. 'Umar, however, pointed out that his own clan, Banī

'Adīy, no longer had any influence in Makkah. No one would protect him should he come to any harm. He suggested that 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān of the Umayyad branch of the Quraysh was better placed to act as the Prophet's ambassador.

Despite the fact that 'Uthmān's clan was very influential in Makkah, he had to go under the protection of his own cousin, Abān ibn Sa'īd ibn al-'Āṣ. Enjoying that protection, he was able to deliver his message, speak to the Quraysh elders and explain to them that the Muslims had come for the purpose of worship only and had no other intention. It was better for the Quraysh, 'Uthmān argued, that they should be seen by the Arabs as faithful to their charge as custodians of the Sacred House. The Quraysh, however, were adamant in their hard-line attitude. The only concession 'Uthmān could get from the Quraysh was that they allowed him to do the *ṭawāf* should he so desire. He made it clear to them that under the circumstances, he would not do so until the Prophet had done his own *ṭawāf*.

'Uthmān's discussions with the Quraysh leaders were prolonged and he was in Makkah for three days. Moreover, he was apparently able to contact some people from among the Quraysh who had adopted Islam and remained in Makkah, keeping the fact of their conversion to Islam a secret. Apparently there were quite a few of these people, who yearned for the day when they would be able to declare their stand and enjoy freedom of faith. 'Uthmān carried a message from the Prophet to them telling them that victory would be coming soon. They were greatly encouraged by that message and requested 'Uthmān to give the Prophet their respects and to tell him, on their behalf, that they believed that God, Who had enabled him to encamp at al-Ḥudaybiyah, was able to open the gates of Makkah for him.

Some reports suggest that 'Uthmān was arrested by the Quraysh when it discovered that he had made these contacts with the Qurayshi Muslims. Indeed, a rumour began to spread that 'Uthmān was killed. It did not take long before this rumour was heard in the Muslim camp. 'Uthmān's prolonged absence could only lend credence to that rumour. Receiving no indication to the contrary,

the Prophet concluded that the report of 'Uthmān's death was correct. The treatment which was meted out to his first envoy, Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah, served as supporting evidence. He felt that the situation had reached a stage where tolerance could only be counter-productive.

A Pledge to Fight and Die

Deeply hurt and very sad, the Prophet felt that by killing 'Uthmān, his Companion and envoy, the Quraysh had closed the door on all efforts which aimed at reaching a peaceful settlement. The other alternative was the one which he had tried hard to avoid: namely, war. He called on his Companions to give him a pledge to fight the Quraysh to the bitter end. He was standing underneath a tree when he requested that pledge, and his Companions rushed to give him what he asked of them. Every one of them pledged that he would fight and never flee from battle even if that meant his own death. The Prophet was pleased with his Companions' responses. He also made a pledge on behalf of 'Uthmān: "'Uthmān is on a mission given him by God and His Messenger. I, therefore, make a pledge on his behalf." He clasped his hands together and said: "This is for 'Uthmān." In comment on this pledge, the Qur'ān says: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise.*" (48: 18–19)

That pledge is known in Islamic history books as Bay'at al-Riḍwān, or 'the pledge earning God's pleasure', in view of the clear statement that God was pleased with those who took part in it. Indeed, the pledge warmed the Prophet's heart, since it was yet another demonstration that his Companions were always prepared to render whatever sacrifice they were called upon to make in defence of the cause of Islam. Those Companions of the Prophet realized that numerically the Quraysh were far superior to them. Besides, when they started their journey, they did not bring their

war equipment with them. War was completely absent from their minds. None of them wore body armour or carried it with him. They carried only the minimum armament which was absolutely necessary for travelling in the desert of Arabia: their swords in their sheaths. Their pledge meant, in effect, that they were determined to face the far superior strength of the Quraysh, on the Quraysh's own ground with swords only, leaving no room for withdrawal or escape. They were fully aware of what they had pledged to do. When they were subsequently asked about the terms of their pledge and what it entailed, their answer was: 'Death'. Such a pledge, readily given and sincerely meant, would definitely earn God's pleasure, as those people had definitely earned it. Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh, a Companion of the Prophet who took part in that pledge, said: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) told us on the day of al-Ḥudaybiyah: You are the best people on earth."

We should stress here a small but significant point about that tree beneath which the pledge was given. The tree was subsequently cut down and the place where it used to stand was forgotten. This is certainly good for Islam. Had it survived, people who are quick to give exaggerated significance to places and to things associated with historical events might have raised a monument in its place or built a mosque or some other building on that site and made it a shrine to visit. Islam does not recognize the sanctity of any such place or object. Had it been allowed to survive, the tree might have acquired, with the passage of time, more significance than the event which took place beneath it. The tree, however, is immaterial, while the pledge itself remains a lesson for every Muslim.

Shortly after the pledge was made, 'Uthmān arrived to give the Prophet an account of his mission. His arrival took the heat off the situation. The Prophet was very pleased to see him alive but was not happy to learn of the Quraysh's adamant attitude. He reflected on the situation, trying to assess the choices open to him.

The Quraysh, on the other hand, heard of the pledge given by the Muslims to the Prophet. Their chiefs were engaged in high level consultations. They realized that the Muslims' pledge meant that their determination to achieve their purpose was not

in doubt. Past experience suggested that should the two sides be engaged in a military conflict, the outcome might very well be a victory for the Muslims, despite their relatively small numbers and poor equipment. That the Muslims could always be relied upon to fight hard and well and not to weaken in the face of adversity was something not to be doubted. Now that they had given the Prophet such a clear commitment to fight to the bitter end, the Muslims would not just go away. Moreover, the Quraysh might not have been fully convinced that they acted within their rights when they tried to prevent the Muslims from worshipping at the Ka'bah. Their motives were nothing more than pride of position and conceit. Hence, the Quraysh realized that they must think seriously of the consequences, especially if the military conflict went against them.

A Delegation for Peace

Some wiser men among the Quraysh must have suggested that achieving a peaceful settlement might preserve the Quraysh's dignity better than war, even if the war ended in its favour. The views of its earlier envoys – particularly those of al-Ḥulays of the Ḥabshī tribe and 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd of the Thaqīf – began to appear highly valid. Moreover, should the Quraysh push matters to the point of flare-up, their action might mean a fight near the Sacred House and in the sacred month. This would, in effect, be setting a precedent which was certain to do more harm than good to the Quraysh. Hence the arguments for moderation suddenly began to appear much weightier. A delegation headed by Suhayl ibn 'Amr was, therefore, dispatched to negotiate the terms of a peace settlement with the Prophet.

The Prophet received Suhayl ibn 'Amr and his delegation well. He instructed his Companions to show their sacrificial animals and to raise their voices with phrases expressing the fact that they had come only in response to God's call to honour the Sacred House.

The talks between the two sides were not easy. Despite the fact that the Prophet was keen to achieve a peace settlement, the

negotiations had to deal with several issues of substance. The topics included: the Prophet's visit to the Sacred House; the Quraysh's determination not to seem to have given in to force; the possibility of agreeing a long term truce between the two sides, putting an end to their frequent military clashes; the sort of relations which should exist between the two sides; and the freedom of each side to make political moves on the wider horizon of the whole of Arabia.

There was, however, no reason to prolong the discussions. The Prophet accepted all the Quraysh's conditions readily. It was Suhayl ibn 'Amr who took a long time in his presentation of each of those conditions and what each of them entailed. Indeed, the Quraysh side were surprised that all their conditions were accepted by the Prophet without too much trouble. It was necessary, however, to write the agreement down and to have it signed by representatives of both sides.

Unease in the Muslim Camp

The Prophet's attitude caused a stir in the Muslim camp. They were not used to seeing the Prophet taking such a very soft attitude. It was also surprising for the Quraysh negotiators themselves. Not only did the Prophet accept all the terms the Quraysh stipulated, he did not consult his Companions in the matter, contrary to his normal practice. Moreover, the terms of the peace agreement were extremely surprising to the Muslims, because they tended to cast the Muslim side as much weaker than the Quraysh. To the Muslims, accepting such terms was neither useful nor necessary. Some of them could not hide their dissatisfaction. This is epitomized by the attitude of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. When the terms of the peace agreement were finalized and were about to be written down, 'Umar came to Abū Bakr and said: "Abū Bakr, is he not God's Messenger?" Abū Bakr answered in the affirmative. 'Umar again asked: "Are we not the Muslims?" When Abū Bakr gave the same answer, 'Umar went on: "Are they not the idolaters?" Abū Bakr again answered: "Yes." 'Umar then asked him: "Why then should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" Abū Bakr

answered with a piece of advice, saying to his questioner: "Follow him whatever he does, 'Umar. I believe that he is God's Messenger." But 'Umar was still perturbed and said: "And I too believe that he is God's Messenger."

'Umar's argument was that since what separated the two sides was really a single issue – right against wrong, faith against lack of faith – those who were on the side of right and truth must not give in to those who championed the cause of wrong and falsehood. The believers must never accept any sort of humiliation when it came to matters relating to faith. Indeed, they should always show pride in their religion. Hence, 'Umar was not to be deterred. He went to the Prophet and put to him the same questions: "Are you not God's Messenger? Are we not the Muslims? Are they not the idolaters?" To all these questions, the Prophet answered in the affirmative. The final question 'Umar put was again the same: "Why, then, should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?"

The Prophet's answer provided the clue to his attitude: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." The Prophet was indeed following Divine orders which he must have received at that time.

The Prophet then called in 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to write down the peace agreement so that it might be signed by both sides. Again, Suhayl ibn 'Amr showed maximum rigidity, while the Prophet showed complete flexibility.

The Prophet told 'Alī to write: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent." Suhayl interrupted: "I do not know this. Write down: 'In your name, Our Lord'." The Prophet told 'Alī to write the phrase Suhayl proposed. He continued with his dictation: "These are the terms of the peace agreement negotiated between Muḥammad, God's Messenger, and Suhayl ibn 'Amr." Again, Suhayl interrupted: "Had I accepted that you are God's Messenger, I would not have fought you. You have to write down your name and your father's name." The Prophet accepted Suhayl's point and revised his dictation, telling 'Alī to write:

These are the terms of the peace agreed by Muḥammad ibn 'Abdullāh and Suhayl ibn 'Amr.

- Both have agreed to a complete truce for a period of ten years, during which all people will enjoy peace and security and will not attack one another.
- Moreover, if anyone from the Quraysh joins Muḥammad without permission from his guardian or chief, he shall be returned to the Quraysh.
- If anyone from those in the camp of Muḥammad joins the Quraysh, they are not required to return him.
- Both sides agree that they harbour good intentions towards each other.
- No theft or treachery shall be condoned.
- Whoever wishes to enter into an alliance with Muḥammad may do so, and whoever wants to enter into an alliance with the Quraysh may do so.
- It is further agreed that you, Muḥammad, shall return home this year without entering Makkah. At the end of one year, we shall evacuate Makkah for you so that you may enter it with your followers to stay for three days only. You shall carry only the armament necessary for a traveller – namely, your swords in their sheaths. You shall not carry any other arms.

A Hard Test of Muslim Intentions

These were the terms of the peace agreement. When they were written down, witnesses from both sides were asked to sign the document. At that moment, something happened to test the patience of the believers and to give them another opportunity to prove the strength of their faith. A man from Makkah arrived in handcuffs and with his legs in chains. He was being kept prisoner there because he was a Muslim. This man was none other than Suhayl's own son, Abū Jandal. It was his father who imprisoned

him and fastened his shackles. Nevertheless, he had been able to escape and to take an unfamiliar route through the mountains surrounding Makkah until he arrived at al-Ḥudaybiyah. When the Muslims saw him, they were very glad that he had escaped and gave him a fine reception.

While the peace agreement was being written down, Suhayl was too busy to notice anything. When it was finished, Suhayl looked up and saw his son among the Muslims. He went up to him, hit him in the face and took him by the collar. Abū Jandal cried aloud: "My fellow Muslims, am I to be returned to the unbelievers to try to turn me away from my faith?" Those words were very painful to the Muslims, some of whom started to cry.

Suhayl ibn 'Amr, however, was unmoved. He said to God's Messenger: "This is the first person whose case I take up. You must return him to me." The Prophet referred to the fact that Abū Jandal arrived before the agreement was completed: "We have not finished drawing up the document yet." Suhayl said: "Then I have not agreed any terms with you whatsoever." The Prophet pleaded: "Then allow me him."

Suhayl said that he would not. Mikraz, another member of the Quraysh delegation, said that they should allow Muḥammad to have Abū Jandal. The father was adamant and refused all appeals to let his son join the Muslims. He went even further and began to hit his son with a thorny branch of a tree. The Prophet again pleaded with him to let his son go, or at least not to torture him. But Suhayl would accept nothing. Some of Suhayl's friends, however, extended their protection to Abū Jandal and his father stopped hitting him. The Prophet explained to Abū Jandal his inability to help him, speaking to him in a loud voice so that he could hear: "Abū Jandal, be patient and endure your situation for God's sake. He will certainly provide for you and those who are suffering with you a way out of your hardship. We have made a peace agreement with those people, giving them a pledge by God that we will be faithful to the terms of our agreement. We shall not violate our pledges."

Kill Your Father

'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was again outraged by the situation. He could not understand why the Muslims should accept such humiliating terms or stand idle when a brother of theirs was subjected to harsh treatment for no reason other than the fact that he believed in God and His Messenger. As Abū Jandal was being led away, 'Umar went up to him and walked by his side. He spoke to him: "Be patient, Abū Jandal. These people are unbelievers. They are worthless. The blood of anyone of them is no more precious than the blood of a dog."

As he was walking by Abū Jandal's side and talking to him, he continued to move the handle of his sword towards Abū Jandal, hoping that Abū Jandal would take 'Umar's sword and kill his father. Abū Jandal either did not wish to kill his father or did not understand or notice 'Umar's gesture. He submitted to his fortune until God would help him get his release. He was led away in his shackles and chains. As the Muslims looked at him, their hearts were full of agony because they were unable to help him.

When the document detailing the peace terms was written down, the Prophet asked a number of his Companions to witness the agreement, in addition to witnesses from the Quraysh side. The Muslim witnesses were Abū Bakr, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Maḥmūd ibn Maslamah and 'Abdullāh ibn Suhayl, another son of the chief Quraysh negotiator himself. Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ and Ḥuwayṭib ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā were the Quraysh witnesses. When the witnessing was finally done, the Quraysh delegation went home.

This peace was supposed to last for ten years. Very few Muslims were able to bring themselves to accept it without experiencing a feeling of unease. What added to their bitterness was the fact that the terms of the agreement meant that they had to go back home without being able to fulfil their purpose of worshipping at the Ka'bah. It should be remembered that the Prophet and his Companions were in *iḥrām*, the state of consecration, having left Madīnah in order to perform the *'Umrah*. They were first prevented

from entering Makkah by the declared intention of the Quraysh to use force to stop them. Now they were prevented by the terms of the agreement which they signed with the Quraysh. They were, in effect, in the position of a *muḥṣar*, a person who sets out from home to do his pilgrimage or *'Umrah* but is unable to reach his destination owing to some reason beyond his control. God declares in the Qur'ān that such a person can release himself from *iḥrām* by slaughtering a sheep or some other sacrificial animal at the point where he cannot continue his journey.

Cancellation of Intended Worship

The Prophet said to his Companions: "Slaughter your animals and shave and release yourselves from *iḥrām*." No one showed any sign of willingness to comply with this order. The Prophet repeated his command three times and still no one was willing to do as he was told. The Prophet was very angry indeed. He went into his tent where Umm Salamah, his wife who accompanied him on this expedition, was waiting. She immediately noticed how angry he was. She asked him the reason why and he answered: "The Muslims are ruining themselves. I have given them a command and they have not obeyed." He explained to her how his Companions received his orders with indifference and how not one of them was willing to obey. She tried to pacify him: "Messenger of God, do not blame them. They have been under great pressure because of all the trouble you have taken to achieve this peace settlement and because they now realize that they have to take the long way home without achieving their purpose." She then gave him a very sound piece of advice: she told him to go out and slaughter his own sacrificial animals and shave, without speaking to any one of them. The Prophet acted on his wife's advice and went out and slaughtered his camels. He then called someone to shave his head. When his Companions witnessed what he did, they rushed to do likewise. Some of them helped others to shave and they were extremely unhappy with themselves for not responding to the Prophet's orders in the first place.

> Not all of the Muslims at al-Ḥudaybiyah shaved their heads: some of them just cut their hair. The Prophet said: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." Some of his Companions said: "Messenger of God, what about those who have cut their hair?" He answered by repeating the same prayer: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." The same question about those who had cut their hair was put to him, but he answered by repeating the same prayer a third time. Once more, he was asked about the other group and the Prophet included them in his prayers, saying: "And those who have cut their hair." When he was asked the reason for repeating his prayers for mercy to the shavers three times before he included the other group, he answered: "They have entertained no doubt."[4]

Al-Zuhrī reports: "The Prophet then began his journey home. On the way back to Madīnah, the Prophet received new revelations – the *sūrah* entitled *al-Fatḥ*, or Victory. Imām Aḥmad reports on the authority of Mujammi' ibn Hārithah, an Anṣārī who had learnt the Qur'ān: "We were with the Prophet at al-Ḥudaybiyah. When we were on the way back, we noticed that people were agitating their camels. People began to ask what was going on. They learnt that the Prophet received a new revelation. We approached him feeling very apprehensive. We saw the Prophet on his camel at Kirā' al-Ghamīm. When people assembled, he read to them the *Sūrah al-Fatḥ*, starting with, '*We have granted you a glorious victory.*' One of his Companions asked him: 'Is it a victory, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'Yes indeed. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, it is a grand victory.'"

Imām Aḥmad relates a report by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "We were with God's Messenger on an expedition. I asked him about something three times, but he did not reply to me. I thought that I had done badly. I mounted my camel and went ahead, apprehensive that something might be revealed to the Prophet concerning me. Soon someone called me by name. I went back to the Prophet fearing what might have been revealed. The Prophet said to me: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me

4. Ibid., pp. 500–516.

last night, and it is much dearer to me than the whole world and all it contains: '*We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future.*'" (Also related by al-Bukhārī, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī quoting Imām Mālik.)

The General Atmosphere

Such was the atmosphere in the Muslim community prior to the revelation of this *sūrah*. The Prophet was certain of what God had inspired him. Therefore, he allowed himself no say in the drift of events other than what such divine inspiration pointed to. He referred to this inspiration at every point and before taking any step. Neither the unbelievers nor pressure by his Companions, who were infuriated by the unbelievers' hostility, would make him change his course. Eventually, God put tranquillity in the Muslims' hearts and they were reassured, accepting without hesitation what the Prophet told them, just like their brethren who never entertained any doubt in the first place. The prime example of these was Abū Bakr whose reassurance was never in doubt, not even for a brief moment.

Hence the opening of the *sūrah* gives the Prophet happy news that greatly delights his heart: "*We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support.*" (Verses 1–3) The opening also refers to the tranquillity granted to the believers, acknowledging that they were true believers and promising them forgiveness of sins, reward and support from on high: "*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph.*" (Verses 4–5) By contrast, their enemies, hypocrites and idolaters alike, incur God's displeasure and suffering in the life to come: "*God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and*

they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination." (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* also notes the pledge the believers gave to the Prophet, considering it a pledge to God. Thus, it establishes a direct relation between the believers and their Lord, the Eternal: "*We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment, but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verses 8–10)

Before completing the discussion of the believers' attitude at al-Ḥudaybiyah, the *sūrah* refers, within the context of unkept pledges, to the desert Arabs who stayed behind and did not join the Prophet on this expedition. It shows their excuses to be unfounded and exposes their ill thoughts about God and their expectation that the Prophet and his Companions would encounter disaster. It directs the Prophet as to the attitude he should adopt towards them in future. The style here emphasizes the believers' strength and the weakness of those who stayed behind. It makes it clear that the Muslims would soon be able to make rich war gains, all of which would be coveted by those who were too slow to join the Prophet on this expedition: "*The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with*

you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verses 11–16)

Within the same context, the *sūrah* tells us about those who have genuine excuses, justifying their staying behind. These are they who have some disability or illness that prevents their participation in war: "*No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish.*" (Verse 17)

The *sūrah* turns again to the believers, their thoughts and attitudes. It refers to them in a way that is full of honour and acceptance, delighting them with good news of what was soon to happen, praising their firm belief and readiness to sacrifice themselves for God's cause. We see here that God puts this select group of people under His direct care, bestowing on them His goodly acceptance and strengthening them in their noble attitude. He tells them in person that He in His glory was a witness with them as they offered their pledges at a particular spot, under the tree. He was certainly aware of their inner thoughts and feelings, was pleased with them and ensured that they would soon achieve victory that would yield great gains, relating this to God's law that operates throughout the universe. This is indeed a great and remarkable event witnessed by the whole universe: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. Were the unbelievers to fight you,*

they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way." (Verses 18–23)

The *sūrah* reminds the believers of God's grace as He stopped their enemies who were intent upon fighting them, denouncing those same enemies who prevented their entry into the Sacred Mosque, and refusing to allow their sacrificial animals to reach their place of slaughter. It reveals to them God's wisdom as He stopped conflict that year, and His grace in making what happened acceptable to them, bestowing tranquillity on them. All this was for a purpose unknown to them but known to God. It was the much better and greater prospect of bringing Makkah into the Islamic fold and making Islam prevail over all religions. All this was according to God's design and by His will: "*It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt… God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verses 24–28)

The *sūrah* concludes with an outline highlighting the special characteristics of this select group of humanity, the Prophet's Companions. It refers to their description in the Torah and the Gospel and emphasizes God's promise to them of forgiveness of their sins and

granting them rich reward: "*Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah and the Gospel: they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.*" (Verse 29)

Thus the *sūrah* gives a full image of the situation that led to its revelation. It does not relate the events in their chronological order, but highlights the lessons that must be learnt, linking individual events to their permanent rules, and special attitudes to the overall universal system. As always in the Qur'ān, it is hearts and minds that are addressed in a highly inspiring way.

A Community Attains Maturity

Looking at the *sūrah* as a whole and comparing it to the one that precedes it in the Qur'ānic order reveals the profound change in the general attitude of the Muslim community over the three years we believe to have separated the revelation of these two *sūrahs*. We realize the effects the Qur'ān had on that community and how it benefited by the careful education the Prophet imparted to it, enabling it to assume its unique position and play its unparalleled role in human history.

It is clear from the general ambience of this *sūrah* and the feelings it generates that the Muslim community had attained maturity, achieved a coherently high standard of faith, become reassured about its duties and no longer needed strong incentives in order to discharge such duties that required sacrificing life and property. It now needed a restraining influence so that it could look at things calmly and accept the decision of the Highest Leadership of the Islamic message to observe a temporary truce in its confrontation with the enemy.

No longer does the Muslim community need a directive of the type: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (47: 35)

or an admonition like: "*You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (47: 38) Nor was there any more need to provide incentives to fight for God's cause by speaking about the nobility of martyrdom and the great honour God grants to martyrs. We do not have here any exposition of the purpose of putting the Muslim community to the test by imposing a duty to fight for God's cause, as we have in the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad: "*Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.*" (47: 4–6)

By contrast, the discourse in the present *sūrah* highlights the tranquillity God placed in the believers' hearts, or bestowed on them, to restrain them from being over zealous. It also reassures them that what took place was by God's command, referring to the Prophet's wisdom as he opted for a lenient and conciliatory approach. It speaks of God's pleasure with those who offered their pledges to the Prophet under the tree, and paints at the end a bright picture of the Muslim community under the Prophet's leadership.

The *sūrah* certainly speaks of the need to fulfil the pledges given to the Prophet and threatens those who go back on their pledges: "*Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 10) Clearly the reference here is one of honour to those giving their pledges to the Prophet, emphasizing the seriousness of the pledge. Reference to breaking such pledges occurs in respect of the desert Arabs who stayed behind. The same consideration applies to the hypocrites, men and women. This reference in the *sūrah* is made in passing, indicating the weakness of this group as compared with the entire Muslim community which had purged its ranks and attained maturity. This reference is very quick, unlike what we have in

the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad, where the discussion of the hypocrites and their Jewish allies occupies a large part of it. This is yet another development in the external attitude of the Muslim community, one that is in harmony with the developments taking place within it.

There is also in the *sūrah* clear evidence of the strength of the Muslim community in relation to the strength of the unbelievers. This is evident in the *sūrah* as a whole and in specific verses. Other verses point out that further victories were to be achieved, making those who stayed behind eager to join the Muslims in order to share the promised war gains. The reference to the fact that Islam would prevail over all other religions is also indicative of the increasing strength of the Muslim community in the period separating the revelation of these two *sūrahs* that occur consecutively in the Qur'ānic order.

There was, then, a clear change in people's hearts, the overall condition of the Muslim community and the situation it was facing. This change can easily be recognized when we follow the events during the Prophet's lifetime as discussed in the Qur'ān. The change reflects the effects of the Qur'ānic approach to the type of education the Muslim community should undergo and the method the Prophet followed in effecting that education. That happy community of the Prophet's Companions was unique in history. However, the change has a telling lesson for those who are in the position of leadership of human communities. They must never become fed up with human weakness, or with what may linger on of past habits, influences of social environment, worldly desire and lack of motivation. All these may have strong effects at first, but persistence, patience and a wise approach ensure steady progress. Moreover, tests and experience are bound to produce their effects when they are utilized to reinforce educational efforts. Gradually, weaknesses dwindle and disappear and believers begin to aspire to higher horizons. They are able to see the superb light emanating from on High. In God's Messenger we have a great shining example to follow. In the Qur'ān we have guidance about the right path to take.

I

A Victory in the Making

Al-Fatḥ (Victory)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

We have granted you a glorious victory, (1)

إِنَّا فَتَحْنَا لَكَ فَتْحًا مُّبِينًا ﴿١﴾

so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. (2)

لِّيَغْفِرَ لَكَ اللَّهُ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِن ذَنۢبِكَ وَمَا تَأَخَّرَ وَيُتِمَّ نِعْمَتَهُۥ عَلَيْكَ وَيَهْدِيَكَ صِرَٰطًا مُّسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٢﴾

God will certainly grant you His mighty support. (3)

وَيَنصُرَكَ اللَّهُ نَصْرًا عَزِيزًا ﴿٣﴾

It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (4)

هُوَ الَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ السَّكِينَةَ فِى قُلُوبِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ لِيَزْدَادُوٓا۟ إِيمَٰنًا مَّعَ إِيمَٰنِهِمْ ۗ وَلِلَّهِ جُنُودُ السَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٤﴾

لِّيُدْخِلَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ
تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا
وَيُكَفِّرَ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ ۚ وَكَانَ
ذَٰلِكَ عِندَ اللَّهِ فَوْزًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٥﴾

He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (5)

وَيُعَذِّبَ الْمُنَافِقِينَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتِ
وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ وَالْمُشْرِكَاتِ الظَّانِّينَ
بِاللَّهِ ظَنَّ السَّوْءِ ۚ عَلَيْهِمْ دَائِرَةُ السَّوْءِ ۖ
وَغَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَنَهُمْ وَأَعَدَّ
لَهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ ۖ وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. (6)

وَلِلَّهِ جُنُودُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَانَ
اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٧﴾

To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise. (7)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ شَاهِدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا
وَنَذِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner (8)

لِّتُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَتُعَزِّرُوهُ
وَتُوَقِّرُوهُ وَتُسَبِّحُوهُ بُكْرَةً
وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٩﴾

so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. (9)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ ٱللَّهَ يَدُ ٱللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۚ فَمَن نَّكَثَ فَإِنَّمَا يَنكُثُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِمَا عَٰهَدَ عَلَيْهُ ٱللَّهَ فَسَيُؤْتِيهِ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward. (10)

سَيَقُولُ لَكَ ٱلْمُخَلَّفُونَ مِنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ شَغَلَتْنَآ أَمْوَٰلُنَا وَأَهْلُونَا فَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَنَا ۚ يَقُولُونَ بِأَلْسِنَتِهِم مَّا لَيْسَ فِى قُلُوبِهِمْ ۚ قُلْ فَمَن يَمْلِكُ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا إِنْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ ضَرًّا أَوْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ نَفْعًا ۚ بَلْ كَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿١١﴾

The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' (11)

بَلْ ظَنَنتُمْ أَن لَّن يَنقَلِبَ ٱلرَّسُولُ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِيهِمْ أَبَدًا وَزُيِّنَ ذَٰلِكَ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَظَنَنتُمْ ظَنَّ ٱلسَّوْءِ وَكُنتُمْ قَوْمًۢا بُورًا ﴿١٢﴾

No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. (12)

وَمَن لَّمْ يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ فَإِنَّآ أَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ سَعِيرًا ﴿١٣﴾

As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. (13)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ يَغْفِرُ
لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَكَانَ
ٱللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿١٤﴾

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. (14)

سَيَقُولُ ٱلْمُخَلَّفُونَ إِذَا ٱنطَلَقْتُمْ
إِلَىٰ مَغَانِمَ لِتَأْخُذُوهَا ذَرُونَا نَتَّبِعْكُمْ ۖ
يُرِيدُونَ أَن يُبَدِّلُوا۟ كَلَٰمَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ قُل لَّن
تَتَّبِعُونَا كَذَٰلِكُمْ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ مِن
قَبْلُ ۖ فَسَيَقُولُونَ بَلْ تَحْسُدُونَنَا ۚ بَلْ كَانُوا۟
لَا يَفْقَهُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٥﴾

When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. (15)

قُل لِّلْمُخَلَّفِينَ مِنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ سَتُدْعَوْنَ
إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ أُو۟لِى بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ تُقَٰتِلُونَهُمْ أَوْ
يُسْلِمُونَ ۖ فَإِن تُطِيعُوا۟ يُؤْتِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ أَجْرًا
حَسَنًا ۖ وَإِن تَتَوَلَّوْا۟ كَمَا تَوَلَّيْتُم مِّن
قَبْلُ يُعَذِّبْكُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٦﴾

Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (16)

لَّيْسَ عَلَى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى
ٱلْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ ۗ
وَمَن يُطِعِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّٰتٍ
تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ ۖ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ
يُعَذِّبْهُ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٧﴾

No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish. (17)

A Different Concept of Victory

> *We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support.* (Verses 1–3)

The *sūrah* opens with a statement about the great favours bestowed by God on His Messenger, comprising glorious victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessing and assured guidance. Together, these favours are granted as a reward for complete, unshakeable trust in God's inspiration and directive, as well as a willing submission to His guidance. The Prophet demonstrated absolute trust, leaving no room whatsoever for his own judgement. He had a dream and proceeded to take action on its basis. His she-camel refused to move and people cried out that she had refused to go forward. He told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. "She is held back for the same reason as the elephant was held back. I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today that helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." 'Umar asked him: "Why should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" His answer was simple, emphasizing his unwavering trust in God's wisdom: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." By contrast, when it is rumoured that 'Uthmān was killed, he showed complete resolve and determination: "We shall not depart until we have fought these people." He called on people to pledge their loyalty. In turn, they gave him their pledges that brought lasting benefits to all who did so.

Such was the victory. Beside it too there was another victory embodied in the peace agreement at al-Ḥudaybiyah, to be followed by numerous other victories taking different forms.

It was a victory in advocating God's message. Al-Zuhrī[5] says: "This victory was the greatest achieved so far in the history of Islam. Battles were fought when armies met in the battlefield. With this peace

5 A prominent scholar of the second generation after the Prophet's Companions. He was the first to work on a *Hadith* anthology, instructed to do so by Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. He died in 124 AH, 743 CE. – Editor's note.

agreement, war was at an end and people were able to talk to each other in safety. They met and discussed all issues. People with any degree of understanding who were approached about Islam soon declared themselves Muslims. In those two years, i.e. between the signing of the al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty and the fall of Makkah, the number of Muslims doubled or became even greater."

Ibn Hishām says: "The evidence in support of the above statement by al-Zuhrī is found in the fact that the Prophet's Companions at al-Ḥudaybiyah were 1,400, but when he marched to Makkah two years later,[6] he was at the head of an army of 10,000." Among those who became Muslim were Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ.

It was also a great victory on the ground. The Muslim community no longer faced danger from the Quraysh. Therefore, the Prophet was now free to address the problem represented by the Jews in Arabia. After the removal of the Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā', al-Naḍīr and Qurayẓah from Madīnah, following their repeated violations of their friendship agreement with the Muslim community, the Jewish threat came from Khaybar and its fortresses. From there, the Jews could easily make the road to Syria unsafe. Khaybar and all its fortresses fell to the Muslims a short while later, and the Muslims were able to take great war gains which the Prophet divided exclusively among those who accompanied him at al-Ḥudaybiyah.[7]

Al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty was a decisive victory in the confrontation between the Muslims in Madīnah and the Quraysh in Makkah, supported by all the unbelievers in Arabia. In his biography of the Prophet, Muḥammad 'Izzat Darwazah rightly says:

> Undoubtedly, this peace agreement described in the Qur'ān as a 'glorious victory' amply deserves this description. Indeed it is one of the most decisive and greatest events during the Prophet's lifetime and in Islamic history generally, consolidating the Muslim

6. The Prophet marched to Makkah when the Quraysh flagrantly breached the peace treaty. Makkah fell to Islam with very little fighting. – Editor's note.

7. The only exception was that the Prophet included with them those who came back from Abyssinia and joined him at Khaybar when the battle was over. He considered these to have been on an expedition advocating the Islamic message throughout their 15 years stay in Abyssinia. – Editor's note.

state. For the first time the Quraysh recognized the Prophet and the Muslim state, treating them on an equal footing. It was keen to avoid military confrontation, preferring to peacefully turn them away from their purpose of entering Makkah. Twice before, the Quraysh tried to invade Madīnah, and the second of these attempts took place only one year earlier. At the time, the Quraysh and other confederate tribes raised a great force avowing to exterminate Islam and the Muslims. When the Quraysh launched this attack, the Muslims in Madīnah went through an extremely hard time as, numerically, they were no match for the attacking forces. The new development leading to the signing of the peace treaty had a marked effect on the Arabs; up until then they had looked upon the Quraysh as the master in Arabia and were strongly influenced by its opposition to Islam. Indeed, when the Prophet embarked on his trip to Makkah, the desert Arabs believed that he would not return safely. The hypocrites in Madīnah were of similar views. Taking all this into consideration, we realize the great importance of this victory.

Subsequent events confirmed the wisdom of the Prophet's action, which was endorsed by the Qur'ān. These events highlighted the great material, moral, political, military and religious benefits that accrued to the Muslim community as a result of this peace agreement. They were now looked upon as the most important power in Arabia; the desert Arabs who stayed away from Islam came forward apologizing for their earlier stance, while the hypocrites could hardly raise a voice. Arab delegations came to Madīnah from distant parts pledging loyalty to the Prophet. Subsequently too, the Prophet was able to smash the strength of the Jews in Khaybar and their other villages on the road to Syria. He was able to send delegations to distant parts, such as Najd, Yemen and al-Balqā'. Only two years later, he was able to conquer Makkah peacefully, putting an end to the long drawn out conflict with the Quraysh. It was then that Islam achieved its final victory in Arabia, and people flocked to Islam in large numbers.[8]

8. Darwazah, Muḥammad 'Izzat, *Sīrat al-Rasūl: Suwar Muqtabasah min al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Vol. 2, pp. 292–293.

Furthermore, the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah was a great victory in a different sense: it was a conquest of hearts and minds, epitomized by the pledge given by the Prophet's Companions that earned them God's pleasure as specifically mentioned in the *sūrah*. It is this conquest that made them worthy of the image drawn of them in the last verse of the *sūrah*. In the history of the divine message, this was a great victory that must be given its true value as we look at how it influenced the turn of events in subsequent years.

The Prophet was delighted with the revelation of this *sūrah*. He was overjoyed with the great favours God bestowed on him and his Companions: the victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessings, guidance on a straight way and God's acceptance of the believers and His beautiful description of them in the *sūrah*. He said: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me tonight, and it is much dearer to me than all that the sun overlooks put together." In another version, he is reported to have said: "A *sūrah* was revealed to me last night which is dearer to me than the whole world and all that it contains." He was keen to express his gratitude to God, and his thanksgiving took the form of long, voluntary prayers, described by his wife, 'Ā'ishah, as follows: "When the Prophet prayed, he would stand up until his feet swelled." She said to him: "Messenger of God! Will you continue to do this when God has forgiven you all your sins, past and future?" He replied: "Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.]

A Medley of Emotions

The first three verses of the *sūrah* were specifically addressed to the Prophet. The *sūrah* goes on to describe the great favours God bestowed on the Muslim community as He gave them such a victory, adding tranquillity to their hearts, and promising further favours in the life to come:

> *It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which*

running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (Verses 4–5)

Tranquillity, or *sakīnah* in Arabic, is a word with pleasant connotations. When a heart is blessed with it, it generates reassurance, trust, comfort, dignity and a ready acceptance of God's will.

The believers experienced conflicting emotions during this encounter. They were looking forward to the fulfilment of the Prophet's dream of entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, realizing that a prophet's dream always came true. They had then to endure a stand-off with the Quraysh, followed by the Prophet's acceptance to return without visiting the Sacred Mosque that year, even though they had entered into the state of consecration required for that Mosque's entry and had marked their animals for sacrifice following the completion of their worship at the Sacred Mosque. All of this was, therefore, very hard for them to swallow. In addition to what we have already quoted in recording the developments at al-Ḥudaybiyah, 'Umar is also reported to have gone to Abū Bakr and said in reference to the Prophet: "Did he not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" Abū Bakr, whose heart echoed the Prophet's own heartbeats, replied: "Did he say that you would do so this year?" 'Umar answered in the negative. Abū Bakr said: "Then you will visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." 'Umar left Abū Bakr and went straight to the Prophet asking: "Did you not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" The Prophet said: "I certainly did; but did I say that you would be doing that this year?" 'Umar again answered in the negative. The Prophet then said: "You will most certainly visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." This gives us a picture of the feelings the Muslims experienced during the stand-off with the Quraysh.

The believers found other conditions imposed by the Quraysh to be totally unfair. Specifically, they found unacceptable the condition that the Prophet should return to the Quraysh anyone from among them who came to him, declaring himself a Muslim, without being given the prior permission of his father or guardian. They were also totally displeased when the Quraysh delegation objected to the mention of God's name, *al-Raḥmān*, or the Lord of Grace, and with their objection to the Prophet's position as God's Messenger being included in the document.

It is reported that 'Alī, who was writing the document, refused to erase this reference, as requested by the Quraysh representative, Suhayl ibn 'Amr. In fact, the Prophet himself rubbed it out, saying: "My Lord! You know that I am Your Messenger."

The Muslims' dedication and enthusiasm to fight the unbelievers were total, as evidenced by the fact that they all pledged themselves to it. Yet the confrontation ended peacefully, requiring them to turn back and go home. Understandably, this was not easy for them to accept. We sense this in their reluctance to slaughter their sacrifices and shave their heads, indicating the end of their rituals. Indeed, the Prophet had to issue his command to them three times, and this to those who were always quick to put his every order into effect. Furthermore, 'Urwah, the fourth emissary of the Quraysh, reported on this to the Quraysh when he returned to give them his advice. As we have noted already, so great was the feeling among the Muslims that they did not slaughter their sacrifices, nor shave their heads until they saw the Prophet doing so himself. Only his action spurred them to follow suit; such was the state of their bewilderment.

The Muslims had travelled from Madīnah intending to perform *'Umrah*. The thought of fighting was not in their minds. Neither mentally nor practically were they prepared for war. They were surprised to see the Quraysh taking such an adamant stance against them, and they were greatly upset when they heard the news that 'Uthmān had been killed. To the Muslims, it was totally unexpected for the Quraysh to send some of its men to aim arrows and stone missiles at their camp. Therefore, when the Prophet, upon hearing of 'Uthmān's assassination, decided to fight the Quraysh and asked his Companions to give him their pledges in support, every single one of them did so. This did not, however, diminish their surprise to find themselves in a situation totally different from what they hoped to do. Such feelings were only a part of what they experienced. Moreover, they were heavily outnumbered, amounting to 1,400 pilgrims, while the Quraysh were in their own city, supported by desert Arabs and other idolaters.

When we consider all these aspects, we better understand the meaning and the effect of the Qur'ānic statement: "*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers.*" (Verse 4) We can imagine

the situation as though we are present there, and feel the comfort of this tranquillity and the peace it generated in the believers' hearts. God was fully aware that the feelings they experienced were motivated by faith. They were keen to defend their faith and fight for it. They did not look for any personal glory. Therefore, He bestowed His blessings on them, giving them such tranquillity, "*so that they may grow more firm in their faith.*" (Verse 4) Reassurance is of a higher rank than passion and enthusiasm. It carries with it a combination of trust, conviction and absence of worry.

The *sūrah* also indicates that military victory was in no way difficult. On the contrary, it was easy, had God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to gratify the believers' wishes. At His command there are countless forces that cannot be overcome. They would have ensured victory for the Muslims at His bidding, whenever He wished: "*To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 4) Indeed everything moves as determined by God in His wisdom. It was through His knowledge and wisdom that He "*sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith.*" (Verse 4) He will thus bring about what He has decided to give them: victory and blessings: "*He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph.*" (Verse 5)

If in God's sight this is a great triumph, then it is indeed a great one. It was so for those who achieved it, giving it its right measure. The believers were delighted with what God granted them. Having listened to the opening of the *sūrah*, learning about the favours God bestowed on His Messenger, they were looking forward to their own share, asking about it. When they were told of it, they were delighted and reassured.

The *sūrah* then tells them of another aspect of God's wisdom in letting events develop in the way they did; namely, requiting the unbelievers and the hypocrites for their actions:

> *God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. To God belongs all*

the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise. (Verses 6–7)

These verses group together the hypocrites and the idolaters, men and women, highlighting their common characteristic of harbouring evil thoughts about God, having no trust in His forthcoming help to the believers. The *sūrah* makes clear that they are all encompassed by evil and cannot depart from its circle. They incur God's anger and, therefore, they are expelled from His mercy. Evil will be their end. In fact, hypocrisy is in no way less than idolatry; indeed it is more contemptible. The harm the hypocrites do to the Muslim community is no less than what the idolaters do, although the two types are different in nature and physical aspects.

The *sūrah* makes harbouring evil thoughts about God the distinctive feature of the hypocrites and the unbelievers. A believer always thinks well of God, expecting what is good in all situations, good and bad. He believes that God will bring him good in both conditions. The fact is that a believer's heart always looks up to God, whose grace and favours never cease. When we establish the bond of faith with God, we realize this fact and appreciate it. The hypocrites and the unbelievers, by contrast, have no bond with God. They have no feeling of this concept, which, in turn, leads them to entertain evil thoughts about Him, casting only a superficial look at things and judging situations by appearances. Thus, they expect only evil to befall them and to befall the believers whenever appearances so suggest. They have no idea of God's power, control of things and events, or His subtle and elaborate planning.

The verse groups together all types of enemies of Islam, describing their position with God and what He has prepared for them, adding a comment pointing to God's power and wisdom: "*To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 7) Nothing of their situation escapes God, and nothing is too hard for Him.

The Promise and the Reward

Again the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, pointing out his role and its objective. It tells the believers about their duty towards God after having

received His message. It makes clear to them that the pledges they gave to the Prophet were indeed pledges given to God. Solemn indeed is a pledge made to God. Furthermore, this imparts to the pledge given to the Prophet even greater honour:

> *We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.* (Verses 8–10)

God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), is a witness who will testify that he has delivered the message entrusted to him to mankind, and he will speak of the reception people gave him. He will state that some people believed and accepted the faith while others rejected it denying its truth, and others still were hypocrites. Some did well and others did badly. He will give his testimony just as he delivered his message. He bears the good news of forgiveness and acceptance by God, as well as a good reward from Him to the believers. He also warns against the ill fate that awaits the unbelievers, hypocrites and evildoers, as they all incur God's anger.

Such is the Prophet's role. Addressing the believers, the *sūrah* makes clear to them the purpose of God's message: it is to believe in God and His Messenger, and to fulfil the tasks and duties of faith. Thus, they support God by implementing His law, and they honour Him in their hearts as they feel His majesty. They also extol His glory and praise Him at both ends of the day, which means in effect the whole day. What is meant here is that in their hearts and minds they feel their bond with God at all times. This is the result of faith which the believers will receive because God sent His Messenger and assigned to him his role outlined in the verse: "*a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner*". (Verse 8)

The Prophet came to them to establish their bond with God, and to solemnize a pledge they give to Him that continues even though the Prophet is no longer with them. When he stretches his hand out to accept their pledges, he is doing so on God's behalf: "*Those who pledge*

their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands." (Verse 10) This is an awesome description. When any of them put his hand in the Prophet's to give his pledge, he realized that God was there present, accepting the pledge, and that His hand also embraced their hands. How awesome and majestic.

This image puts an end to any thought anyone might have had about retracting their pledge. Should the Prophet disappear in person, God Himself will never disappear. It is He who accepts this pledge, watches its fulfilment and gives its reward. "*He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment.*" (Verse 10) Whatever pledge is made between God and any of His servants is richly profitable to God's servant. It is he who will profit by God's favours, while God is in no need of anyone. Therefore, when anyone breaks his pledge with God, he is the loser. Furthermore, he exposes himself to God's anger and punishment, because God loves those who are true to their promises and dislikes those who deliberately break them. "*But to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 10) No details are given here of the reward; it is merely described as rich, or great, as is the literal meaning of the Arabic adjective *'aẓīm* used here. This reward is rich by God's measure and value which we who dwell in this limited space of the earth can never imagine.

The Ones Left Behind

Having established the true nature of the pledge and referred to thoughts of breaking or honouring it, the *sūrah* now speaks of the desert Arabs who were left behind. They refused to accompany the Prophet on this expedition, entertaining no good thoughts about God, expecting defeat for the believers who were going to the Quraysh's own land, when it was the Quraysh that had attacked Madīnah twice over a short period of time.[9] The *sūrah* tells the Prophet of what excuses the desert Arabs would employ when they see him returning safely together with his Companions. They would realize that the treaty he

9. The original text says that the two attacks occurred in two successive years, i.e. within one year or a little more of each other. The fact is that the first, the Battle of Uḥud, took place in Shawwal, the 10th month of year 3, while the second, the Encounter of the Moat, occurred towards the end of year 5, which means that two full years separated them. – Editor's note.

had concluded with the Quraysh signified that the latter had climbed down. No matter how harsh its conditions may appear, the Quraysh now treated Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his followers as its equal, with whom it sought peace rather than confrontation. The *sūrah* also details the true reasons why these desert Arabs stayed behind, exposing their reality to the Prophet and the believers. It tells the Prophet of the rich war gains the Muslims would shortly achieve, and that these same Arabs would try to accompany them on their next encounter in order to receive a share of those. The *sūrah* tells the Prophet what he should say to them when this takes place. He must not allow them to be part of that expedition, which was certain to end in his favour. Only those present at al-Ḥudaybiyah would be permitted to accompany him. He was also to tell those Arabs left behind that they would be called upon to join the Muslims when they needed to fight other people known for their great war prowess. If they truly wanted to join the Muslim camp, they should join the Muslim army on that day, whatever outcome God may give them. If they obeyed, they would receive rich reward. If they turned away, as they did once before, they would be made to endure a painful suffering:

> *The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to*

the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verses 11–16)

The Qur'ān does not merely reply to the excuses of those who stayed behind; it uses the occasion to treat minds and souls, identifying the points of weakness and deviation in order to treat them effectively. It then states those values that are true and permanent, as well as the proper basis on which to base attitudes and behaviour.

Those Arabs who stayed behind belonged to the tribes of Ghifār, Muzaynah, Ashja', Aslam and others who lived in the area close to Madīnah. They tried to excuse themselves, saying: "*Our property and our families kept us busy.*" (Verse 11) This is no excuse. People will always have families and property. If having these is a good excuse to exempt anyone from their duties towards their faith, no one would ever fulfil such duties. They also asked the Prophet: "*do then ask God to forgive us.*" (Verse 11) Even when they say this, they are not serious: "*Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts.*" (Verse 11) The reply given them stresses the truth of God's will that cannot be stopped or prevented by bravery in war or its avoidance. They are all subject to God's power, and He is fully aware of all things. His will controls everything as He determines: "*Say: Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.*" (Verse 11)

The question implies the instruction to submit to God's will and to obey His orders without hesitation. No hesitation will ever prevent harm or delay benefit. Excuses are no use, because nothing escapes God's knowledge and nothing affects the requital He decides on the basis of His perfect knowledge. This is a fitting directive, using the appropriate moment in order to heighten its effect.

"*No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness.*" (Verse 12) Thus they are shown the truth of their attitude. Their true thoughts and intentions, which they thought were concealed,

are placed before their very eyes. They thought that the Prophet and his Companions were going to their death, and that they would never return to their families in Madīnah. They said of the Prophet: 'Is he going to fight those who attacked him in his home city and killed his Companions?' They allowed no room for the care God takes of those of His servants who are dedicated to His cause. Moreover, since they lacked motivation based on faith, they could not feel the importance of duty and that a duty must be fulfilled, regardless of the cost. Nor did they realize that obedience to the Prophet must not be based on any thought of gain or loss. It must be fulfilled as a duty, regardless of the outcome.

The thoughts they had seemed pleasing to their hearts. They could not see any other possibility. Their ill thoughts about God derived from the fact that their hearts had always been devoid of goodness. The *sūrah* uses a single Arabic word, *būr*, for the phrase 'devoid of goodness'. This word is normally used to describe a dead land where no plant can grow. The same applies to these Arab's hearts, as also to them generally. Their hearts are lifeless, yield nothing good. How else would a human heart be when it harbours no good thought of God, having severed its bond with Him? It must be *būr*, lifeless, heading for nothing good.

The True Balance

Such do people think of the Muslim community. However, it is only people like those desert Arabs who have severed their bond with God, their hearts devoid of goodness, who view the Muslim community as being on the verge of eradication, heavily outnumbered by the forces of evil and deviation. They look at the limited numbers of the advocates of Islam, or their poor artillery, or their low position in society and conclude that they will inevitably be defeated. Like the desert Arabs of old, such people avoid every association with the believers, looking only for their own safety. God, however, will ensure that such ill thoughts inevitably end in failure, and will change positions as only He knows how, to set the true balance. It is He who holds this balance in His mighty hand, lowering some people and raising others above them. The hypocrites who harbour evil thoughts about God, throughout all places and generations, can never understand how this is done.

The true balance is that of faith. Therefore, those Arabs are referred to it. The *sūrah* outlines the general rule of rewarding people in accordance with this balance, highlighting the possibility of receiving God's grace. They are thus encouraged to take the opportunity available to them now in order to benefit by God's forgiveness and to enjoy His grace: "*As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verses 13–14)

They used to cite their families and property as the reasons why they stayed behind. Of what benefit will their families and property be to them when they are thrown in the blazing fire, which has been prepared for them if they continue to deny God and His Messenger? These verses show such people the two options available to them and they are invited to choose one. Then it is God who issues the promise and the warning to them. To Him belongs the heavens and the earth and all in between them. It is He who can extend forgiveness and inflict punishment, as He chooses.

God rewards people according to their deeds, but His will is free, unrestricted by anything. This truth is established here so that it is accepted by all. There is no conflict between it and the fact that people's reward is based on their actions, because this is the basis that God has willed to choose.

Nevertheless, God's forgiveness and mercy is close at hand. Let anyone who so wishes benefit by it, before the suffering befalls those who refuse to believe in God and His Messenger in accordance with His will.

Fine Prospects

The *sūrah* then shows a glimpse of the prospects God has in store for the believers, contrary to all the unbelievers' thoughts. This is done in such a way that suggests that it is all going to happen soon: "*When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: 'Let us come with you.' They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: 'You shall not come with us. God has already said so.' They will then say: 'You begrudge us [our share].' How little they understand.*" (Verse 15)

Most commentators on the Qur'ān take this verse to refer to the conquest of Khaybar. This may be so, but the statement also gives clear impressions that do not necessarily relate to Khaybar. It suggests that the Muslims would soon achieve an easy victory. Those who previously stayed behind would realize that it would be so and hence they ask to join the Muslims. Perhaps what makes Qur'ānic commentators specify Khaybar is that this occurred soon after al-Ḥudaybiyah. Indeed, it took place in the first month of year 7, less than two months after the signing of the treaty, and it brought the Muslims rich war gains. Khaybar was the last Jewish stronghold in the Arabian Peninsula. It was here that some of the Jews of al-Naḍīr and Qurayẓah had sought refuge after they were ordered out of Madīnah.

Commentators are almost unanimous that God promised those who give the Prophet their pledges at al-Ḥudaybiyah would have the war gains achieved at Khaybar, all for themselves, with no share for anyone else. I have not found any text to support this view, which may though be based on what actually happened. When the Prophet marched on Khaybar, he did not allow anyone to join him other than those who had taken part at al-Ḥudaybiyah.

Be that as it may, God instructed the Prophet to refuse permission to those who had previously stayed behind, assuming that they even offered to join the Muslim army. Specifically, he was to say that their participation would be contrary to God's orders. He also told the Prophet that when they were refused such permission, they would say: "*You begrudge us*", and want to deprive us of our legitimate share of any war gains. What they say thus betrays their lack of understanding of God's purpose. It is fitting that those who are eager to share in the booty be deprived of it, while those who are dedicated to God's cause, obeying His orders, should enjoy His grace and be the ones to enjoy the war gains He grants the Muslim community. They were the ones who had obeyed when they expected nothing other than a hard fight.

God further instructed the Prophet to tell them that they would be called upon to fight against people known for their war prowess, and that the fight would continue until this enemy had been subdued. Should those who formerly stayed behind pass this test, they will still receive their reward, but if they continue to disobey they will have failed what is their final test: "*Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: 'You will*

be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering.'" (Verse 16)

Reports differ as to the identity of this military might, and to whether this would occur during the Prophet's lifetime or after he passed away. It is most likely, however that it happened during his lifetime so as to further test the Arabs in the surrounding areas of Madīnah. What is important here is to note the Qur'ānic method of education, and how hearts and souls are treated by Qur'ānic directives and practical tests. We see this clearly in the way the inner thoughts of those who stayed behind were exposed before their very own eyes to the believers. We also see it in the way true values and the principles of proper behaviour are pointed out to them.

Since the test makes it a duty binding on everyone to join the Muslim army, God identifies those with real excuses who are exempt from so joining, without their being subject to any punishment: "*No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish.*" (Verse 17) A person who is blind or lame has a permanent disability exempting him from military engagement. A person who is sick has a temporary excuse, one that extends until he has recovered full health.

Ultimately, it is all a question of obedience or disobedience. It is a mental attitude, not a technical situation. Those who obey God and His Messenger will be rewarded by admittance into heaven. Those who turn away will receive painful suffering. Anyone can put the hardship of striving for God's cause in the balance against the comfort of staying behind and what it entails. He may then make his own choice.

2

People's Pledges and God's Promises

لَّقَدْ رَضِيَ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
إِذْ يُبَايِعُونَكَ تَحْتَ ٱلشَّجَرَةِ فَعَلِمَ
مَا فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ فَأَنزَلَ ٱلسَّكِينَةَ عَلَيْهِمْ
وَأَثَٰبَهُمْ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿١٨﴾

God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, (18)

وَمَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً يَأْخُذُونَهَا ۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ
عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٩﴾

and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. (19)

وَعَدَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ مَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً
تَأْخُذُونَهَا فَعَجَّلَ لَكُمْ هَٰذِهِ وَكَفَّ
أَيْدِيَ ٱلنَّاسِ عَنكُمْ وَلِتَكُونَ ءَايَةً
لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَيَهْدِيَكُمْ صِرَٰطًا
مُّسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٢٠﴾

God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. (20)

There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. (21)

وَأُخْرَىٰ لَمْ تَقْدِرُوا۟ عَلَيْهَا قَدْ أَحَاطَ
ٱللَّهُ بِهَا ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ
شَىْءٍ قَدِيرًا ﴿٢١﴾

Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. (22)

وَلَوْ قَٰتَلَكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَوَلَّوُا۟ ٱلْأَدْبَٰرَ ثُمَّ
لَا يَجِدُونَ وَلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا ﴿٢٢﴾

Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way. (23)

سُنَّةَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّتِى قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ
وَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ ٱللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا ﴿٢٣﴾

It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. (24)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى كَفَّ أَيْدِيَهُمْ عَنكُمْ
وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ عَنْهُم بِبَطْنِ مَكَّةَ مِنۢ
بَعْدِ أَنْ أَظْفَرَكُمْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَكَانَ
ٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرًا ﴿٢٤﴾

They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt.

هُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوكُمْ عَنِ
ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ وَٱلْهَدْىَ مَعْكُوفًا أَن
يَبْلُغَ مَحِلَّهُۥ ۚ وَلَوْلَا رِجَالٌ مُّؤْمِنُونَ
وَنِسَآءٌ مُّؤْمِنَٰتٌ لَّمْ تَعْلَمُوهُمْ أَن
تَطَـُٔوهُمْ فَتُصِيبَكُم مِّنْهُم مَّعَرَّةٌۢ بِغَيْرِ

عِلْمٍ ۚ لِّيُدْخِلَ ٱللَّهُ فِى رَحْمَتِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ لَوْ تَزَيَّلُوا۟ لَعَذَّبْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ مِنْهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. (25)

إِذْ جَعَلَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فِى قُلُوبِهِمُ ٱلْحَمِيَّةَ حَمِيَّةَ ٱلْجَٰهِلِيَّةِ فَأَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ سَكِينَتَهُۥ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ وَعَلَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَأَلْزَمَهُمْ كَلِمَةَ ٱلتَّقْوَىٰ ۖ وَكَانُوٓا۟ أَحَقَّ بِهَا وَأَهْلَهَا ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٢٦﴾

The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. (26)

لَّقَدْ صَدَقَ ٱللَّهُ رَسُولَهُ ٱلرُّءْيَا بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ لَتَدْخُلُنَّ ٱلْمَسْجِدَ ٱلْحَرَامَ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ءَامِنِينَ مُحَلِّقِينَ رُءُوسَكُمْ وَمُقَصِّرِينَ لَا تَخَافُونَ ۖ فَعَلِمَ مَا لَمْ تَعْلَمُوا۟ فَجَعَلَ مِن دُونِ ذَٰلِكَ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿٢٧﴾

God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. (27)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُۥ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ ٱلْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلدِّينِ كُلِّهِۦ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدًا ﴿٢٨﴾

It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness. (28)

Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward. (29)

مُّحَمَّدٌ رَّسُولُ اللَّهِ ۚ وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ أَشِدَّاءُ
عَلَى الْكُفَّارِ رُحَمَاءُ بَيْنَهُمْ تَرَاهُمْ رُكَّعًا
سُجَّدًا يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانًا ۖ
سِيمَاهُمْ فِي وُجُوهِهِم مِّنْ أَثَرِ السُّجُودِ ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ مَثَلُهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَاةِ ۚ وَمَثَلُهُمْ فِي
الْإِنجِيلِ كَزَرْعٍ أَخْرَجَ شَطْأَهُ فَآزَرَهُ
فَاسْتَغْلَظَ فَاسْتَوَىٰ عَلَىٰ سُوقِهِ
يُعْجِبُ الزُّرَّاعَ لِيَغِيظَ بِهِمُ الْكُفَّارَ ۗ
وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْهُم مَّغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا
عَظِيمًا ﴿٢٩﴾

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* speaks only about and with the believers, with that unique and happy group of them who gave their pledges and commitments to the Prophet under the tree, in the presence of God, the witness who solemnized that pledge placing His hand over theirs. That elite group heard God's words revealed to His Messenger: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) They also listened to the Prophet as he said to them: "You are today the best people on earth." [Related by al-Bukhārī on the authority of Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh.]

What we have here is a discourse about this select group as God speaks to His Messenger. We also have God's words to this select group, giving them the happy news of forthcoming war gains and conquests. God also speaks about the care He took of them, protecting them from their enemies, during this trip and what He will do for them in future, assuring them of victory by means of the laws He has set in operation, which never fail. He strongly condemns the enemies of the Muslim community, explains the wisdom behind choosing peace this time, confirming the truth of the Prophet's dream about visiting the Sacred Mosque. He assures the Muslims that they will enter it in safety, fearing nothing, and that His faith will prevail over all religions on earth.

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse describing this community of believers, the Prophet's Companions, adding their descriptions to be found in the Torah and the Gospels, as well as His promise of forgiveness of their sins and granting them a great reward.

A Unique Event

> *God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise.* (Verses 18–19)

Today, fourteen hundred years after the event, I am trying to visualize the great moment when the universe witnessed the divine announcement from on high addressed by God Almighty to His trusted Messenger concerning the Muslim community. I want to see the whole universe at that great moment and its conscience as it responds to this most generous announcement, speaking of a group of people at a particular spot in this universe. I want to feel how those extremely happy people felt when they heard, with their own ears, that God was speaking about them, telling them that He was well pleased with them, defining the place where they were and what they had done in order to earn His pleasure: "*when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree.*" (Verse

18) They heard it all from the Prophet who never said anything but the truth, delivering it as a special message from God Almighty.

O my God! How did they – those happy people – receive that divine communication at that ecstatic moment? It is a communication that points to every single one of them and says, "to you in person God is saying that He was well pleased with you as you pledged your allegiance under the tree. He was aware of your inner feelings and He bestowed tranquillity on you."

When we read or hear God's statement: "*God is the Patron of the believers,*" (2: 257) or, "*God is with those who are patient,*" (2: 153) we may feel happy and reassured, hoping that we may be included among such. Those people, however, heard that God was speaking about them personally and individually, telling each of them that He was well pleased with them, knowing what was in their hearts. That is great indeed!

"*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) He knew that the passion they felt in their hearts was for their faith, not for their ego or for personal glory. He knew that their pledges were sincere, and that they were seriously restraining themselves so that they would stand behind the Prophet in all sincerity, obeying his orders, accepting any adversity with patience. Therefore, "*He sent down tranquillity upon them.*" We almost see this tranquillity being lowered calmly and with dignity, pouring an air of peace and reassurance on those hearts that were full of enthusiasm for direct action.

God also "*rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) This peace treaty, coupled with the circumstances leading to it, was indeed a victory, heralding many more. The conquest of Khaybar, which most commentators cite as the one promised here, may indeed have been one of these. "*And with many war gains for them to take.*" (Verse 19) If the victory meant here is that of Khaybar, then the war gains would be with the victory itself. However, if the victory mentioned refers to the peace treaty itself, then the promised war gains would come later. Indeed, the peace treaty left the Muslims free to achieve victory on several fronts.

"*God is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 19) This comment fits well with the preceding verses. God's pleasure, the victory and the promise of war

gains are all indicative of God's might, control, elaborate planning and wisdom.

As God Speaks

Now the *sūrah* addresses the believers themselves, speaking to them of the peace treaty, or victory, to which they resigned themselves:

> *God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things.* (Verses 20–21)

This is an announcement of happy things to happen, given by God to the believers who accept it as certain. They realize that God has prepared for them numerous gains and they lived afterwards to see this true promise fulfilled in the best way. God says to them here that He has hastened this one, which may be a reference to al-Ḥudaybiyah, as stated by Ibn 'Abbās, to emphasize its being a victory, as indeed it was, or it may be a reference to Khaybar, as Mujāhid says, since Khaybar produced the first war gains after al-Ḥudaybiyah. The first view is perhaps much weightier.

God also granted them a favour when He restrained the hands of hostile forces. He indeed held back the hands of the Quraysh, as well as other hostile groups who were waiting for a chance to attack the Muslims. Their opponents outnumbered them by far, but the believers were true to their pledges, fulfilling their duties. Therefore, God rewarded them by restraining and holding back their enemies' hands.

"*So that this may become a sign for the believers.*" (Verse 20) This encounter, which they disliked at first, feeling it to be too much of a demand, is described by God as a great sign, which will enable them to see the results of what He has planned for them and how they will be rewarded for obeying the Prophet and submitting to His will. Thus, they will come to realize that it is great, bringing them much benefit, and they will be doubly reassured.

"*He will guide you on a straight way.*" (Verse 20) This is again a reward for your obedience and true allegiance. Thus, they will have a combination of war gains and guidance on a straight way, giving them all that is good. All this comes about as a result of something they initially disliked. God, thus, teaches them that what He chooses for them is the best thing. This also trains them to show absolute obedience.

God also tells them of other favours He will grant them. There will be more war gains: these they are unable to secure by virtue of their own forces, but which God will let them have by cause of His power and planning: "*There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 21)

Again, reports differ as to what these gains refer to: is it to the conquest of Makkah? Or to Khaybar? Or is it the victories secured against the Byzantine and Persian Empires? Or does it refer to all other conquests achieved by the Muslim community after al-Ḥudaybiyah? Most probably, the *sūrah* refers here to the conquest of Makkah, which followed the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah and resulted from it. The peace treaty lasted only two years. Thereafter the unbelievers violated it, and God facilitated Makkah's conquest for the Muslims, with hardly any fighting. It was Makkah that had continued to present great difficulties for the Muslim community in Madīnah. It had attacked them twice, and was able to turn them away from the Sacred Mosque when they tried to visit it prior to signing the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah. God, however, overwhelmed Makkah with His power, handing it over to the Muslims without fighting: "*God has power over all things.*" (Verse 21) This was, then, an implicit piece of happy news. It was left undefined because at the time when the *sūrah* was revealed, it still belonged to the future, which is part of the realm that lies beyond human perception. Hence, God gives them this hint to reassure them and help them to look forward to what may be coming their way.

In line with the reference to the present war gains and the future ones they await, the *sūrah* clearly tells the Muslims that they will be victorious. The signing of the peace treaty was in no way due to their weakness, or because the unbelievers were too strong for them. Instead, it was meant to happen for a definite purpose God wanted to achieve. Had

the unbelievers fought them, they would have been crushed. Such is the rule whenever the believers and unbelievers meet in a decisive battle:

> *Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way.* (Verses 22–23)

Thus, victory for the believers and defeat of their enemies are part of the universal law God has set in operation. It is unchangeable. This is bound to give the believers immense confidence and reassurance. They know that God's law will never fail to operate. It may be delayed for some time, for reasons that are closely related to the adherence of the believers to the way God wants them to adhere, or for reasons that bring about the conditions that lead to victory for the believers against the unbelievers. There may be other reasons known to God for such delay, but God's law will continue to operate, without fail: "*Never will you find any change in God's way.*" (Verse 23)

God also reminds them of His favour when he stayed the unbelievers' hands from the Muslims, and stayed the Muslims' hands after they had gained victory over their attackers. This refers to an incident when about 40 of the unbelievers tried to launch an offensive. They were taken prisoner, but the Prophet pardoned them:

> *It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do.* (Verse 24)

This was an event the addressees witnessed, but God mentions it in this way to refer every move and every happening to His direct planning. They, thus, feel how God's hand directs everything for them, guides their footsteps and their feelings. They will then unhesitatingly surrender themselves to Him. They will be absolutely certain that everything is in God's hand, and that His choice is the best. They move according to His will in everything they choose or refuse. He wants only what is best for them. When they surrender to Him, every good thing comes their way easily and without delay. He sees them and knows the ins and outs

of their situation. What He chooses for them is based on His perfect knowledge. He will not let anything they deserve escape them: "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 24)

Exposing the Unbelievers

The *sūrah* then tells the believers about their opponents' position in God's sight. It explains how God considers the unbelievers' actions as they turn the believers away from His Sacred House, and how He looks at the believers in a totally different way from these others:

> *They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt... God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things.* (Verses 25–26)

According to God's measure, they are truly unbelievers, deserving this repugnant description: "*They were the ones who disbelieved.*" (Verse 25) This is recorded against them as if they are the only ones in this class, confirmed in disbelief. Hence, they deserve to be disliked by God who hates unbelief and unbelievers. Their other obnoxious deed of turning the believers away from the Sacred Mosque and forbidding the sacrificial animals from reaching their destination is also recorded: "*They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice.*" (Verse 25)

This amounted to gross misconduct according to Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions; it was gross according to all religions known in the Arabian Peninsula since the time of Abraham, their great ancestor.

Restraining the believers from fighting them was not, then, out of compassion or because their fault was small. It was for a different purpose which God explains to the believers: "*Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt...*" (Verse 25) There were a number of Muslims in Makkah who could not migrate to Madīnah because of their weak position, and did not declare their acceptance of Islam for fear of persecution by the unbelievers. Had the Muslims attacked Makkah and a fight taken place, the Muslims might have killed some of these since they did not know who they were. This would have meant Muslims killing Muslims; a situation that must be avoided. Moreover, the Muslims would have had to pay blood money to their families when it became known that they were Muslim.

Besides, God knew that among the unbelievers who prevented the Muslims' entry into the Sacred Mosque were some who would be good believers, and who would earn God's mercy. Had these two groups been separated from the rest of the unbelievers, God would have allowed the Muslims to attack and He would have punished the unbelievers severely: "*God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering.*" (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* then provides a further description of the unbelievers, showing their inner feelings after it has given an account of their apparent deeds: "*The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance.*" (Verse 26) This was not a passion for a particular faith or code of living, but rather a fury of arrogance and rigidity. This same fury led them to oppose the entry of the Prophet and his Companions to the Sacred Mosque, as also prevented the sacrificial animals from reaching their place of sacrifice. They were thus in breach of every tradition and religion. That they were prepared to commit such a breach had everything to do with their standing among all the Arab tribes so that it could not be said that Muḥammad entered Makkah in spite of them. Because of such ignorant passion, they perpetrated this gross offence against all tradition and all religion. They were prepared to violate the sanctity of the Sacred Mosque, which gave them their own

special position in Arabia, as well as the sanctity of the sacred months, which was observed under Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Their fury and ignorance was clearly apparent in their harsh response to everyone who suggested that they pursue a line of compromise, criticizing their plan to prevent Muḥammad and his Companions from entering the Mosque. This fury again manifested itself in the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn Amr's objection to include in the treaty God's attributes, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful, or the Prophet's status as God's Messenger. Such a hardened attitude could only have been the result of fury, ignorance and arrogance.

God left them to their fury and ignorance because He knew their adamant refusal to submit to the truth. At the same time, He protected the believers from entertaining such passion, giving them instead feelings of tranquillity and piety: "*Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well.*" (Verse 26) Calm tranquillity and piety are fine qualities suited to a believing heart which feels its bond with God, reassured by it. A person with such qualities always places his trust in God, and watches God in everything he says or does. Such a person does not behave arrogantly, nor do they let personal anger get the better of them. Instead, they are only motivated to anger in support of their faith and for God's sake. Therefore, if they are ordered to calm down, they willingly obey.

Therefore, the believers were most worthy and deserving of the word of piety. This is yet another point on which they are commended by God, who favoured them with the tranquillity He bestowed on them. This is all an honour given to them by the One who knows them well: "*God has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 26)

The Prophet's True Vision

We have already learnt that some of the Prophet's Companions on this trip, who were delighted with his dream knowing that prophets' dreams always come true, found it hard that his dream should not be fulfilled that year, and that they would be prevented entry to the Sacred Mosque. God assured them, however, that the Prophet's dream was true

Muḥammad ibn Maslamah went ahead with horses and arms until he arrived at Marr al-Ẓahrān, about one day's travel, by camel, from Makkah. There he found a few men from the Quraysh who were greatly worried at what they saw. They thought that he was about to attack Makkah in violation of the peace treaty, which stipulated that there would be no war between the two sides for ten years. When the Prophet encamped at Marr al-Ẓahrān where he could see the idols placed in the Sacred Mosque, he sent all the Muslims' arms, including bows, arrows and spears to a place called Baṭn Ya'juj. He then marched towards Makkah with his Companions having only their swords in their sheaths, as he had promised the people of Makkah.

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ at the head of a delegation to the Prophet. They said to him: "Muḥammad, we have never known you to break a promise ever since you were a young child." He asked why they were saying this. They replied: "You are trying to enter the city carrying all your arms; spears, bows and arrows." The Prophet said: "I am not going to carry arms into the city. We have sent them to Baṭn Ya'juj." Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ then replied: "This is more like what we know of your faithfulness."

Many of the Quraysh nobility left Makkah and went into the surrounding mountains; this because they did not wish to look at the Muslims as they arrived at the city for worship. Indeed, the very sight infuriated them. The rest of the Makkans were either out in the streets or on rooftops looking at the Prophet and his Companions as they entered repeating their phrases that declared their submission to God. The Prophet was riding his she-camel, al-Qaṣwā', which he rode the previous year. His Companion, 'Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah, held the she-camel's rein and guided its march.

Thus the Prophet's dream came true and God's promise was fulfilled. The following year witnessed the fall of Makkah to Islam, and the divine faith came to reign in Makkah, then throughout the rest of Arabia. Then God's other promise and the other piece of good news were fulfilled: "*It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verse 28) The religion of truth prevailed, and not only in the Arabian Peninsula. Within half a century it prevailed across much of

the inhabited parts of the earth. It subdued the entire Persian Empire and took over much of the Byzantine Empire. It marched as far as India and China before moving into Malaysia, southern Asia and Indonesia. In the sixth and seventh centuries, these areas constituted most of the then known world.

This true religion continues to prevail over all religions, even after its political retreat from much of the areas it moved into, particularly in Europe and the major islands in the Mediterranean. It prevails even though the power of its people is very weak compared to the new powers that have recently emerged in the East and the West. Indeed, as a religion, Islam prevails over all else. It carries within itself and in its nature the elements of its strength. It moves forward, supported by neither sword nor gun drawn by its people. Its advance is due only to its inherent harmony with human nature and the natural laws of the universe, and to the fact that it satisfies, with perfect ease, the requirements of mind and soul, progress and civilization, regardless of whether people live in tents or in skyscrapers.

Any religious person who looks objectively at Islam is bound to recognise the soundness and inherent strength of this religion. Nor can they help but recognise its ability to lead humanity with wisdom and to answer its progressive needs in an easy and straightforward way: "*Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verse 28)

We see, then, that God's promise was fulfilled in the immediate, political form, before one century had elapsed after the Prophet's mission. God's promise continues to be fulfilled in its substantive form, as Islam prevails over all other religions. In fact, it is the only religion that continues to act and lead in all situations. Perhaps only the Muslims do not understand this truth. Other people know it and take it into account as they draw up their policies and programmes.

The Muslim Community

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse that paints a superb picture of the community of the Prophet's Companions, adding God's commendation of that unique and happy group of people who earned His pleasure and who were also informed of that fact:

> *Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.* (Verse 29)

This is a remarkable picture drawn by the superior style of the Qur'ān. It includes several snapshots depicting the group's main conditions, both subtle and clearly apparent. One shot portrays their attitude to the unbelievers and to one another. Thus, they are "*firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another.*" Another shows them as they are in worship: "*You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer.*" Yet a third image reveals what preoccupies their minds and characterizes their feelings: "*seeking favour with God and His good pleasure.*" A fourth shot focuses on the apparent effect worship has on their faces as they dedicate all to God: "*They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah.*" A number of additional quick images tell us how they are described in the Gospels: "*They are like a seed that brings forth its shoot; strengthens it; grows thick; stands firm on its stem; delights the sowers; through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*"

The verse begins by confirming the Prophet's status, denied by the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn 'Amr, and the unbelievers he represented at the time: "*Muḥammad is God's Messenger.*" The verse then goes on to paint its beautiful picture in the unique Qur'ānic style.

Needless to say, the believers go through different conditions and situations during their lifetimes. However, the images shown in the verse concentrate on their permanent features, highlighting these so that they serve as the main lines in the overall picture. The selection of these particular images clearly shows that God wants to bestow honour on this happy community. This is reflected right from the very first image

that depicts them as: "*firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another.*" They take such a firm and unyielding attitude towards the unbelievers, despite the fact that those unbelievers included their parents, siblings, kinsfolk and friends. However, they severed all these relations with the unbelievers. They are at the same time full of mercy towards one another, when their only bond is brotherhood in faith. This means that in both conditions of unyielding firmness and flowing mercy the determining factor is faith. There is absolutely no personal consideration. Their feelings, emotions, behaviour and bonds are based on faith alone, making them hostile to its opponents, compassionate towards their fellow believers. They discard all selfish thoughts and make their bond with God the only one to which they attach any value.

Again God's wish to honour this community is clearly apparent in making prominent their condition as they worship: "*You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer.*" The way this is portrayed suggests that this is their permanent condition, one that we see whenever we look at them. In fact, bowing and prostration represent the condition of worship, which is the core feature of their personality. Therefore, it is expressed in a way that makes it permanent during their time, as if they spent their whole lives bowing and prostrating.

The same applies to the third image, which concentrates on their inner thoughts and feelings: "*seeking favour with God and His good pleasure.*" Such are their permanent feelings and what always preoccupies them. All they aspire for is God's favour and earning His pleasure.

The fourth image focuses on how apparent worship and inner feelings are reflected in their appearances: "*They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations.*" Their faces shine with transparent clarity and the warmth that worship imparts. This is not a reference to the dark mark associated with prayer that appears on the foreheads of some people, as people may wrongly think when they hear the words, '*the marks of their prostration.*' What this expression refers to is the mark of worship, which is symbolized here by prostration as it expresses submission to God in the clearest form. The mark of this submission is seen on their faces; in other words there is no trace of pride, arrogance or selfishness. Instead, what is reflected is noble humility, purity and a serenity that adds to the shine on a believer's face.

This bright overall picture contains nothing new. It is also painted in the Torah as God gave the world the news of the emergence of this community of the Prophet's Companions.

The Gospels give another picture of Muḥammad and his community, describing them as "*And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot.*" It is a fertile seed that sends forth its shoot which does not weaken the stalk. On the contrary, it "*strengthens it*", or the shoot may be strengthened by the stalk. Thus the plant "*grows thick*", and its stem acquires strength and structure. The plant now "*stands firm on its stem*", upright, neither bending nor crooked. This is how the plant looks, but what feeling does it give to farmers who can immediately distinguish a fine plant that is bound to yield fruit? It gives them a feeling of pleasure: "*delighting the sowers*". A variant reading of this phrase puts the delighted onlookers in the singular, '*delighting the sower*,' which in this case refers to the Prophet, as he was the one that looked after the seeds until they harvested a noble and delightful community that was unique in history. The unbelievers experience a different feeling as they look on: "*Through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*" Sending such a feeling of rage into the unbelievers' hearts is clearly intended. It suggests that the planting was by God or by His Messenger, so as to yield a harvest that accomplishes God's purpose in enraging His enemies.

Again this picture is nothing new. It was painted before Muḥammad and his Companions began to walk the earth, in the Gospels as they herald the happy event of God sending Muḥammad with His final message.

Thus does God record in His book the qualities of this select group of the Prophet's Companions, so that it will be recognized by all creation. It remains the ideal and the role model for future generations, as the standard of faith they should emulate.

In addition to all this honour, God gives them a promise of forgiveness for their sins and a supreme reward: "*To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.*" The promise is given in such general terms after highlighting their special features so as to make them the first to whom the general description applies. The honour granted them is more than enough for anyone, but God's favours and bounty are limitless, unending. Therefore, they are granted forgiveness and a rich reward.

Once more I try today, fourteen centuries after the event, to visualize the beaming faces and rejoicing hearts of those people as they received this great honour and promise bestowed on them by God. I try to see them as they look at their own picture painted by God in His book. I look at them as they are on their way back from al-Ḥudaybiyah, when this *sūrah* was revealed and relayed to them; how they reflected on it, and how it touched their hearts and souls. I see them looking at one another, with each one seeing in his brother the mark of the grace he himself feels. I try again and again to live with them a moment of this splendid festival they experienced, but how can one who was not present there share all that, except from afar? It can only be by a special favour of God's grace, bringing close that which is indeed far. Lord! You know that I aspire to a special gift of this unique favour.